An Interview with Dan Povenmire:
Co-creator of *Phineas and Ferb*

Adam Holmes

There are a lot of shows out there catering to children these days (be it animated or not) but nothing is quite like *Phineas and Ferb* on the Disney Channel. Not one of the characters is mean-spirited or dumb (except Dr. Doofenshmirtz, but that's still a stretch); the comedy is both edgy and sweet without being too adult or childlike; and the storylines in each episode are just plain fun.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to speak with Dan Povenmire, co-creator of the hit television show. He talked a little bit about the path that led him to the show, the process of pitching it to the executives at Disney, and why it has become so successful with children and parents alike. He also gave his thoughts on the animation industry and how students of animation can better their craft, whether with regards to story development or draftsmanship. All in all, it was an inspiring experience that should tickle the ears of anyone looking for advice from an animation director at the top of his game.

Adam Holmes: *How early were you interested in animation?*

Dan Povenmire: When I was applying to colleges, I was trying to get into film school. I applied to the programs at USC and CalArts. The CalArts School of Film sent me a letter saying that the artwork I included in my portfolio caught the eye of the animation department and they wanted to offer me a spot. I thought to myself, "CalArts. That's the best animation school in the country. I don't want to go into animation," and I threw the letter away. In retrospect, that was probably not the best thing to do. However, at the time there was nothing happening in animation. That was the *Black Cauldron* days, when even Disney was making crappy, crappy animated films. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *The Little Mermaid* hadn't come

out yet, *The Simpsons* wasn't on television, and there was nothing out there worth working on to make you excited to go into the field.

AH: *So, what caused the change of heart?*

DP: I had always drawn, but I really wanted to be a filmmaker. I went into live-action and it was very hard to get work. I was doing second-unit stuff, like editing, and whatever I could do to make money. Then, someone told me they saw an ad from a studio that needed a storyboard artist so I applied and ended up as a board artist on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Toxic Crusaders*, *James Bond Jr.*— all these shows by the same studio. After that, I was out of work for six months, and I was really needing some money to come in. I was hired to write a live-action screenplay for a slasher film called *Psycho Cop II: Psycho Cop Returns,* which actually got made! The same week, I was hired to do character layout for *The Simpsons*. And so, the first two weeks I was working on *The Simpsons*, I was also going home every night and writing ten pages of screenplay. I was told I could direct [*Psycho Cop II*] if I wanted to, but, it would only be for a set fee and I would be gone for two months. Afterwards, I probably wouldn't have gotten my job back on *The Simpsons*, where I was receiving a steady paycheck. So, I turned them down and thought I would come back to live-action filmmaking eventually, but I never did. When I worked in that industry, I didn't enjoy hanging out with most of the people I worked with. There's a different mindset in live-action, all the parties were shmooze-fests. There was all this desperation. Whereas, in animation, people were a lot more relaxed and I think it's because, if you can draw, people who don't draw themselves can recognize a good drawing. And what's more, that person doesn't think they can draw better than you. But when it comes to writing and directing, the people who are hiring you think they could do it better, and that's where the desperation comes from. When I started working on *The Simpsons*, I had such a great time. I was doing all the things I loved about filmmaking and it was with people I enjoyed working with. Since then, I never looked back.

AH: *"Life is a Fish" is a comic strip you created for the student newspaper at USC. Can you talk a little bit about it and how you transitioned from comics to animated cartoons?*

DP: *Life is a Fish* got me drawing again. I was sort of a child-prodigy artist. I did a lot of fine art, pen and ink animals and scenery, limited editions in art fairs, and stuff like that. By the time I got to high school I was burned out. While attending the University of South Alabama, I saw a campus cartoonist contest that *Rolling Stone* was sponsoring in the school newspaper. I was like, "I can probably do that. I'm a funny guy. I can write and draw. I can put the two together!" I drew this comic strip that became *Life is a Fish* and I drew one weekly for two years. When I got to USC, the first thing I did was take my strip to the student newspaper. Mark Ordesky, who is now the president of Fine Line Features (he produced *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy) was the editor of *The Daily Trojan* at the time. He said they didn't do comic strips in the paper but I left my work with him while I took the campus tour that day just in case he had time to look it over.

When I came back he says, "Hey, this stuff 's really funny! Could you do one everyday?" I told him I could but inside I was thinking, "One every day are you crazy? Why are you telling this person you can do this everyday?" It was a small lie, but it was one that I had to contend with. I did a daily strip for seven years there and I was always able to come up with some new gag. Writing and drawing a comic strip helped in everything I've done after that. It forced me to be a writer and an artist at the same time. When I got the job on *Rocko's Modern Life*, for instance, they needed someone that could draw and write so, I took my comic strip in and I think they hired me because of it. I recommend it for anyone that wants to work in animation—it really forces you to look at how a joke is set up and paid off.

AH: *What were the events that led up to the creation of the show with Jeff "Swampy" Marsh?*

DP: Well, there were sixteen years of events. Swampy and I created the show.

Note to reader: at this point, Swampy enters the room and seizes control of the interview.

Swampy: I, Swampy, did the whole thing. Dan had nothing to do with it—he lies! Complete and utter liar! Everything he says is a lie! It was always me, me, me, me!

I've been carrying him for years. And I'm better looking than he is. Sorry, was I interrupting? I'll go.

DP: All of that is true except for the "better looking" part.

Swampy: (On the way out of the door): Fair enough.

DP: Where was I? We were writing together on a show called *Rocko's Modern Life* and we loved writing together. He's one of those people that your senses of humor just fit together. We decided to create a show together so we could continue to work together when *Rocko* was done. We created *Phineas and Ferb* pretty much the way it looks on television right now. There have been a couple of additions, but when you look at the pitch packet, it's exactly this show. We shopped it around a little bit. It got optioned twice but nobody made it. Then, Swampy moved to England and I continued to pitch it. I'd dust it off every four years and take it to different studios. We got a lot of interest from Fox Kids and then they were bought up by Time Warner, so the show got lost during the transition. We pitched to Nickelodeon and it got all the way up their echelons until the second guy from the top said, "I don't get it," and threw it out.

It's a heart-breaking process. It's like Lucy with the football. As the show gets closer to being produced, you get your hopes up only to be disappointed when that doesn't happen. So, I wasn't good about getting it out there constantly. Finally, I was directing a couple of pilots for other people at Disney and Meghan Cole, who was the executive at the time, asked if I had anything to pitch. I pitched *Phineas and Ferb* to them and they said, "We're not looking for anything with boys in the lead right now but we'll keep the packet, if you don't mind." That usually means they are too nice to throw it away in front of you. A year later, almost to the day, I got a call from Meghan and she said Disney wanted to option *Phineas and Ferb*. I called up Swampy, who was still in England, and asked if he would come back to Los Angeles and work on it with me. He said, "That's the sound of me packing." I told him to hold on because we still had to make the pilot. He had already planned a trip here, and I was planning a trip to France with my wife's family. He came here for two days, we wrote the rollercoaster story, and then I storyboarded it the whole week I was on vacation in France. Every night, I would get my drawing pad out and I would draw from about ten at night until five in the morning. When I was

done, we flew by England and stayed at Swampy's place for a couple of days. We spread it out on this big dining room table. Hashed out the dialogue and punched up the jokes. I brought it back here and pitched to the executives on the wall, which I insisted because two of the main characters didn't even speak. We pitched it to them and they loved it. We even had to come back and pitch to other executives who heard how great the show was. Then they told us we need to send something to England, to Disney UK, because they are partners and put up half the money. I made an animatic with PowerPoint and recorded my voice doing all the characters and describing the story. It was the absolute best way to sell a show because the executives didn't have to use any imagination to figure out what it was going to be like. And, if you watch that animatic, it works just as well as the "Roller Coaster" episode. It's almost exactly the episode except I'm doing the voices and the drawings are rough. I know that's why the show sold, because, that videotape got copied and sent to every executive.

AH: *Was there anything you based the show off of?*

DP: Swampy and I both had very creative families. All of my friends wanted to come over to my house on the weekends. If we couldn't come up with something fun or weird to do, like make a movie with my little Super 8 camera or build a fort or jump our bikes over a ditch, my mom would come in with projects for us to do. The show's all about the creativity of a nine-year-old boy. What that would be like if the limitations of the physical world didn't exist.

AH: *What inspired the character design?*

DP: At the time, I was working on a lot of different shows and their characters all have different shapes. Homer is sort of a fireplug. Bart is coffee can. "Hey! Arnold" is a football. The shapes I never see are the sharp angle shapes. On a piece of butcher paper tablecloth, at a restaurant in Pasadena, I drew a triangle and thought about how could make a head out of it. I liked it so much, I tore it off and brought it home. I drew him a couple more times and I drew Ferb, which looked a little different than he does today. I brought them into work the next day and built the whole world around those designs. It was really just me playing around with geometric shapes.

DP: That was my job on *Family Guy*. I was directing my own episodes but I was also directing all of the musical numbers. The visual gag bits. For example, they would need to show democracy sweeping across Iraq in two minutes, so I would come up with what would be seen. I did the "Shipoopi" number for the episode "Patriot Games." When Seth Macfarlane gave me the song to listen to, I was driving home with it on. It was all this music with nothing happening and nobody singing. That's what I've got to fill up with visuals. I suddenly got both terrified and excited at the same time. By the time I got home, I'd listened to it so many times that I started formulating what I could do in there. When the scene aired, it didn't seem as long because I was able to fill up the time and make it interesting. Everything feels like it was choreographed. "Shipoopi" is one of my favorite things that I did on *Family Guy* and it's one of the things I want to put on my reel.

AH: *Every episode of "Phineas and Ferb" has a song, which seems daunting. What's the production schedule for the music?*

DP: It's the most fun part of the process. In the first season, it was always Friday night. The joke is, Swampy and I (and often Martin Olson, who is one of the writers and a talented musician) between the three of us, we can write a song in any style about anything in about an hour. If we add more people to the mix, it's more fun, but it takes longer. Then it's just a big party and we order pizza. We write the song and then sing it into the answering machine to the composer and he produces the underscore and makes the song sound like we want it to. For example, this song should sound like Abba. This should sound like a jock jam. He will produce it over the weekend and have it ready to go on the air by Monday morning. We get to do all of the song writing without the tedious recording process which is liberating for me.

AH: *What are you're thoughts on succeeding in this industry?*

DP: I think it's a good idea. You should succeed. Growing up anywhere but Los Angeles, many kids hear: "You can't make a living drawing pictures! There's a reason they call them starving artists." I feel like I should tell them the opposite because you can make a living drawing pictures and it's a great thing to do. You don't have to sell your own show. There are seventy people on staff here that are

able to pay their bills by coming into work everyday and drawing. That's a wonderful thing. Figure out what you would do for free and then figure out how to make a living at it. Then, it doesn't matter how little you're making. It will be enough. If you are doing something you hate, it doesn't matter how much money you make. It will never be enough. And in animation, you get paid pretty well! Compared to any other job out there, it's more fun and you get paid decently. If it's something you're excited to get up and do in the morning, that's the definition of success.

AH: *Do you have any bad work habits? Good work habits?*

DP: My bad habit is that I'm working constantly. I over pose drawings, which isn't always a bad thing. I'm very good at forcing myself to be creative. That's what most people have trouble with when starting out in the industry because before, they just wait for the muse to hit them. However, in the real world you can't do that. Jerry Seinfeld said when he started in comedy that he didn't work at it all day. There was no scheduled time for him to work; he would just wait for the comedy to come to him. Then, one day, he saw some steel workers coming back from lunch and he thought, "Those guys get back to their jobs after lunch. If they can get themselves to go to work on cue, I can." After that, he became the hardest working comedian of his time. From that, I've learned how to just turn on the creativity when I need to.

AH: *If you could say one thing to the young animators watching, what would you tell them?*

DP: I would say, draw at every opportunity you can get. Try to structure gags whether it's through a comic strip or written down on paper. It always helps to know how a gag is structured. You can make a lot more humor or a lot less humor by the way you draw something. Pay attention to humor because so much of animation is humor. It's inevitable and you're going to be called on to do that. John Lasseter said, when he first started working at Disney, he was turning in his first scene to his mentor, and the animator flipped his work and said, "Okay. But what is the character thinking at this moment?" Lasseter didn't know what to say, he was just trying to make a good drawing. You need to know what your characters are

thinking while you are animating. That's the essence of animation. Giving them a life and showing that your characters have a thought process. Take Ferb, for example. He says, maybe, one line every episode and most of the time he doesn't change expression. So, it's incredibly important that we show what Ferb is thinking through the way he looks. He might shoot his eyes back and forth really fast to show that he's panicked or suddenly raise an eyebrow to say he's skeptical. But, we want the audience to know these subtleties so they know what Ferb is thinking. It will always give you better results in the end. And finally, find what part of the process you are good at. There are people that specialize in characters, backgrounds, storyboarding, animation, sheet timing, etc. Enjoy the craft and throw yourself into it with passion. Enjoy your career. Animation is a wonderful thing to get to do for a living. I promise.